

Fran Buntman. *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. xviii + 340 pp. \$75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-80993-1.



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In his work on collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs writes, "no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve the recollections." He further states, "we preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated." [1]

In post-apartheid South Africa, Robben Island holds a special place in the memory of many South African citizens. It has become a "must visit" for everybody who visits Cape Town, from locals to international tourists and other visitors. Many political biographies and autobiographies about Robben Island prison have been published, some of them dating back to the 1980s. However, all these (auto)biographies are based on the memory of individuals who were incarcerated at Robben Island prison from the 1960s to 1990s. They are written in a life story form, based on the memories of the individual. This does not necessarily mean that the memory of those individuals was not shaped by what was taking place in the wider society. To the contrary, a close reading of

these biographies and autobiographies reveals that their memories were shaped profoundly by the events that were taking place in society at the time of writing. An example of this is Indris Naidoo's biography, which was written while Naidoo was in exile, and which had the objective of educating the youth about the liberation struggle and especially to expose them to some of the methodologies of torture used by the apartheid special branch police. [2]

How then is Fran Buntman's book different from the orientation of the many biographies and autobiographies that have been published about the experiences of political prisoners that were incarcerated at Robben Island maximum prison? How differently is she telling the story of imprisonment in her book, *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid*?

For a start, although Fran Buntman's book was published in 2003, research for the publication began immediately after the first non-racial democratic elections in South Africa and the installation of the first Black President, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela. One of the institutions pro-

mulgated by the new democratic order was the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and the mood in the country more generally was one of reconciliation. Fran Buntman's work is heavily based on oral interviews with former political prisoners, who had to narrate their experiences within this climate of victory over apartheid and reconciliation with their former foes for the benefit of progress, reconstruction, and development. Thus, there is no doubt that their memories of their prison experiences would have been influenced by the conditions in which they found themselves in post-apartheid South Africa and the ways in which they desired to position themselves within this new society.

Chapter 2, "Politics and Prison," is an overview of the reasons why in the 1960s the South African apartheid regime arrested and imprisoned many individuals who resisted the apartheid system. In this chapter Buntman briefly outlines the roots of the apartheid system as located in the "arrival of Europeans" in South Africa—without actually going into detail about how this happened—and quickly jumps to the victory of the National Party in 1948 (the Party that introduced apartheid). The same chapter deals with some of the resistance movements that opposed the apartheid system. In her analysis of the events that led to the imprisonment of political prisoners, Buntman touches on the methods of resistance that were applied by each liberation movement in a very interesting, albeit brief, way. While I would have loved to see some detail on the reasons why the African National Congress (formed on January 8, 1912) and the Pan African Congress (formed in 1959) "separated" during this period, I however understand that this is not the subject that she wanted to probe; it is only highlighted to give an understanding of the different strategies adopted to resist the apartheid regime. In short, in this chapter Buntman aims to give us an overview of the forms of resistance that led to imprisonment. She discusses resistance to apartheid, the reasons why people resisted, and the strategies

they used to resist. In the process of resisting apartheid legislation, many people were arrested and sentenced to long-term imprisonment, which they had to serve on Robben Island.

After their imprisonment, they found the conditions in which they were incarcerated to be very bad and had to fight for the improvement of these conditions. In chapter 3 of the book, Buntman goes into detail on the conditions in which prisoners found themselves, the treatment by the authorities in the early 1960s, and how some of the common law prisoners were used against the political prisoners by the authorities. She shows how prisoners started to mobilize themselves in order to resist the treatment meted out to them by the authorities. In order to illustrate the conditions in which prisoners found themselves, she decided that the autobiographies of former political prisoners should speak to us; this in my view is the strength of the chapter because in instances where she has to do a thorough analysis of the events in prison such as resistance through hunger strikes, "tools down" at the quarry, and other forms of resistance, one already has an idea of how prisoners themselves thought of the conditions in prison and how they felt about the treatment.

Having offered a clear analysis of the prison conditions, the following chapter is an analysis of some of the victories that were achieved by the political prisoners. It should be noted that some of the resistance strategies that were employed by prisoners at Robben Island prison were also employed by other political prisoners—though with varying success—in Kroonstadt prison, where mostly women were kept, and in Pretoria Prison, where mostly white men were kept. One could also argue that the strategies and tactics that were employed by prisoners to resist the authorities and fight for better conditions were similar to those strategies and tactics used in the broad resistance to segregation and apartheid outside. The only difference was that these strategies had to be

adapted to different conditions and circumstances. In short, the resistance outside prison was meant to yield certain results, just as the resistance inside prison was also meant to yield certain results. In the case of prison, these results were better prison conditions where prisoners would be allowed to participate in cultural activities, including sport, and to engage in academic studies in order to develop themselves. In this chapter Buntman outlines the role that was played by different individuals and organizations to make this a reality. She also shows us that although prisoners studied under difficult conditions of imprisonment, some of them managed to obtain not just one degree but several. We also know that Govan Mbeki was a prolific writer while in prison and managed to write a manuscript, which was later published by David Philip and the Mayibuye Centre entitled *Learning From Robben Island: The Prison Writings of Govan Mbeki*.^[3]

However, Buntman balances this romantic view of achievement and cultural activity in prison with an account of the losses that prisoners suffered. She does this through examining family relationships. As an example, she takes the institution of marriage and demonstrates that some of the marriages were a casualty of imprisonment as a substantial number of men were divorced by their wives while in prison or, shortly after their release, found that their marriages disintegrated. This illustrates the price that had to be paid by those who were committed to the fight for equality, justice, and peace for all.

Chapter 5 and 6 are the ones that make the reader pause. If the reader had thought that the conflict was only between the jailed and the jailers, Buntman shows it was not so: human nature does not work that way. Conflict between people is a normal process, wherever you find more than one individual. In these two chapters the book takes us through the process of conflict inside the jail between the African National Congress (ANC),

the oldest liberation movement in Southern Africa, and the Pan African Congress—a splinter of the ANC. This conflict took many forms—some of it took the form of ideological differences where the parties criticized each other's political ideology: at other times it took the form of physical violence. The conflicts were resolved eventually through tolerance of each other's views and better politicization of the rank and file. However, conflict started again in the 1970s with the arrival of large numbers of Black Consciousness Movement-allied prisoners, who were mostly young. After a while, this conflict was again resolved through negotiations and better politicization of the new inmates. In short, the two chapters are a reality check for the reader to understand the complex nature of humanity and imprisonment. In addition, they show the different strategies that were used by the older generation to deal with the antagonism of the authorities as compared to those employed by the new prisoners, who were mostly young. These chapters are a reflection of a society in struggle at various stages of development and at different periods of that development.

Indeed the last few chapters of the book are dedicated to the role political prisoners played in the development and the nature of the struggle in South Africa. Many of the political prisoners who were released from prison were given specific missions by the leadership. Some, like Mac Maharaj, were instructed to leave the country to make contact with the ANC in exile immediately after their release. Others, like Jacob Zuma, were to revive the internal struggles of the ANC and also make links with the ANC in exile. Therefore, each cadre of the ANC that was released from prison had a particular mission to complete. This aroused the ire of the Special Branch as some of the people that were released and subsequently banished left for exile right under their noses. Furthermore, young people under interrogation frequently mentioned some of their names. It was as a result of this that Robben Island prison was recognized by both the political prison communi-

ty and the police as the university of the liberation struggle. Men went to Robben Island with a limited understanding of politics, except for their hatred of the apartheid system, and came out of Robben Island sophisticated politicians.

It is not surprising that many of the people who took part in the first negotiations with the apartheid regime after Nelson Mandela was released from prison were former Robben Islanders. It is also no wonder that many of the former oppressed groups in South Africa associate their liberation with the sufferings of exile and imprisonment. It is further no surprise that today Robben Island occupies a special place in the hearts and minds of many South Africans, both former oppressed and oppressors. Indeed, it is for this reason that the Robben Island museum today tells the story of reconciliation and peace through its narratives, exhibitions, and programs.

In short, this book is a "must read" for any individual who is interested in the liberation struggle in South Africa, and especially the story of imprisonment under apartheid. While it falls short of giving a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between exile, imprisonment, and internal struggles, this book goes a long way in filling the gap in our understanding of how male prisoners at Robben Island coped with their imprisonment and emerged victorious in many ways, despite having suffered for their ideals.

Finally, what does all this have to do with memory and why people remember what they do—or, to use Halbwachs's word, how we "reproduce" what happened in the past? In her analysis of the political situation in South Africa, Buntman does not simply want to bring back the memory of imprisonment; it would seem to me that she has a clear understanding that these experiences go beyond remembrance and into the sphere of identity. Many former prisoners identify themselves as "Robben Island graduates," from Mandela to Vusumzi Mcongo (one of the least known former political prisoners). We too identify them

as former political prisoners, former exiles, or former detainees. Like clan names, these identities have become an integral part of them. Therefore in remembering them, we also remember a part of our dark past that many would wish did not happen or that is not talked about except in polite tea parties. Buntman denies that these things should be talked about in polite ways; she puts them right into our faces so that we too can recognize ourselves as a people.

Notes

[1]. M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory: The Heritage of Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 47.

[2]. Indres Naidoo, *Robben Island: Ten Years as a Political Prisoner in South Africa's Most Notorious Penitentiary as told to Albie Sachs* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983).

[3]. Govan Mbeki, *Learning from Robben Island: the Prison Writings of Govan Mbeki* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1991).

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